

Testimony regarding HB 5037

Submitted By:

Maegan Adams

Good evening, Sen. Osten, Rep. Walker, and members of the Appropriations Committee. My name is Maegan Adams, I am the Executive Director of Bristol Child Development Center, formerly known as Bristol Preschool Child Care Center. We have been in business since 1971. We are a NAEYC Accredited, subsidized program that currently has 124 School Readiness preschool slots, 16 Child Day Care preschool Slots, 31 Child Day Care infant and toddler slots, and nine private pay infant and toddler slots, we are also CHEFA funded, accept care4kids, and we are the only subsidized infant and toddler program in Bristol.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify today on the Governor's proposed budget for the Office of Early Childhood. This budget is an insult to our field, we are amid a fundamental staffing and wage crisis, and many programs are on the brink of collapse. My Center alone lost twelve teacher this past year, all of which left to work for higher wages, six of those staff went to Boards of Education as paraprofessionals, because their rate of pay is much higher, and the responsibility of the job is far less. When we pleaded with them to stay because we are a full year center and told them that they can make just a little bit more from working for us full-time, they told us no, and that they would take secondary jobs over the summer to make thousands more than I could ever offer. Our field is being depleted, and our staff who once were recognized as champions are finding it hard to stay in jobs, they love with little to no return on the time and effort they put in.

We have been struggling to find quality staff because our agency cannot afford to pay what teachers deserve as we are a flat-funded program, soon to be operating in the red. Because we are funded through the Office of Early Childhood, we cannot adjust our tuition to help increase revenue. We require our teachers to have at minimum an associate degree, we prefer them to have bachelor's degrees and we put them on an education plan if they do not. We ensure that they meet extremely specific qualifications to continue to be in their roles. We expect dedication, quality, higher education, and continued professional development, for them to make minimum wage. Their jobs are one of the most important and influential in a child's life between the ages of infancy right up to kindergarten.

In addition, we are an economic necessity so that parents can have quality care while they go to work. If there were no centers available for families our economy would collapse. We have forced women out of the workforce to stay home and care for their children because we cannot find teachers to open classrooms, because we cannot pay them what they deserve. At this moment, I have one classroom that has a waitlist of families but has been closed since August because I need 3 teachers to open the room. Additionally, my colleagues in other centers also have empty classrooms with families waiting to enroll because we just cannot get teachers to come to a job that is paying barely over minimum wage. We should be able to pay our teachers a respectable livable wage to match what they deserve for their quality, education, and experience.

It has been incredibly challenging to find staff when there are large franchises and big box stores that can pay much more than we can, for example, Amazon is starting high school graduates at almost 19 dollars per hour, with a \$3,000 sign-on bonus, and had at least 8 hours of overtime per week. Other companies such as Hobby Lobby, CVS, Walmart, McDonalds, and Aetna, all start their staff around \$17.00 per hour or higher.

Childcare could never afford to pay their staff that rate, and I would like to share why. In 2015, funded full day preschool slots received \$8,924.00 per student per year, this is a 6-to-10-hour day slot, for a minimum of 50 weeks per year. Minimum wage was \$9.15 per hour. Today, we receive that exact amount in funding per student, but minimum wage is about to be \$14.00 per hour as of July 1, 2022, and then will increase again to \$15.00 per hour as of June 1, 2023. Minimum wage has increased almost five dollars per hour, but our reimbursement rates have not moved at all in the last seven years. Think about what the cost of living was seven years ago. Nothing compared to what it is right now.

We are receiving about 50% of what it truly costs to run a high-quality classroom, our staff are struggling, morale is down, and no one is joining our field. Without the appropriate funding I foresee a very dim and depressing future for the early childhood field and their educators as we will be forced to budgetary decisions that will begin to jeopardize our quality, staff, and the entire agency.

We in the Early Childhood Field are begging you to please invest in the \$700M down payment to keep our programs open, higher staff, pay them livable wages, and keep our economy strong.

Sincerely,
Maegan Adams
Executive Director of Operations
Bristol Child Development Center